

Writing the BBC: the perils of historiography

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Jean Seaton's book on BBC in the 70s and 80s has been widely faulted. But is there some intrinsic reason why writing histories of the BBC is so difficult?

Pinkoes and Traitors – the BBC and the nation 1974-1987 by Jean Seaton, Profile Books, 326pp, £30

For those who find it all too easy to resist the attractions of Caversham - and the BBC paper archives there situated - Asa Briggs is a savior. He has been there and has the t-shirt. A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: five volumes published between 1961 and 1995, covering the period from 1897 to 1974, 4094 pages, lots of pix, pounds of figs. And it's all yours for a mere £660.

And now we also have Jean Seaton's Pinkoes and Traitors: The BBC and the nation 1974-1987, dedicated to Lord Briggs and explicitly announcing that its start date is dictated by the 1974 end-point of his history. It is hard not to see this book as a continuation of Briggs' masterwork and therefore judge it, ultimately unfairly, to be deficient by comparison. This is because it does not really compare: it is not 1000+ pages long (as are the later Briggs volumes); its scholarly apparatus is not comprehensive; its style is, largely, more journalistic than magisterial. It does not pretend to Briggs' level of comprehensiveness nor to the chronological regularity of his narrative.

Neither is it published, as was Briggs, by the OUP. Instead, the BBC's history in these years is presented in a series of rather impressionistic essays, many with cutesy titles and cross heads: 'The Royal Wedding: British Shintoism at Work'; 'The Natural History of the Attenboroughs'; 'Women in the BBC: The triumph of the Trouser Suit'. But the context of A History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom is unavoidable and I am afraid the verdict has to be that Seaton too has been to Caversham and has not brought back a t-shirt: at least, I must note with much regret, not a t-shirt that I can see being a vade mecum for all who are concerned with the BBC and its history.

It is no mark of distinction to say I rely on Briggs. All must. It is indispensable, even to those who wish to rewrite him as a consequence of their own investigations and thinking. Any discussion of the BBC has to be, in my view, grounded in an understanding of its history and without Briggs (or long days in Caversham) this cannot be easily gained. But in one crucial regard Seaton echoes Briggs. Leave aside the kneejerk antipathy of much of the press to the BBC and all its works, most of what is otherwise published, both journalistic and scholarly, is grounded in an assumption that the BBC, despite its faults, is a jolly good thing. But when historians - Seaton as well as Briggs - address the

detail, anomalies are thrown up. The BBC is not always such a good thing. It can't be, of course. Contrary evidence, though, cannot be easily suppressed in a scholarly context if any legitimacy is to be maintained; and Seaton, like Briggs, does not do so. The result is that the books are suffused with cognitive dissonance. The facts reveal negatives but the conclusions - on balance as it were - are inevitably positive. The BBC survives as a good thing. The history proves it.

The last time I had occasion to use *The History of Broadcasting* was in writing a piece about Suez. The received account, much pushed by the BBC itself, is that a significant resistance was mounted against Anthony Eden and his attempts to manage the news. Briggs devotes some 63 pages to detailing this episode (and the Hungarian uprising which was happening at the same time), concluding that: "there is much the British public did not know about the origins and course of both crises. It would have known less, however, without the BBC" (1995d: 102).

Briggs claims that "the BBC had reported crisis events and crisis talk during every phase" (1995d: 102), but knows full well that it did not really do this. And he knows (and documents) why. He knows why, for example, a large fleet moving men and matériel to Cyprus could do so in virtual secrecy. An hysterical prime-minister, Eden, a thin *causus belli*, and an hostile opposition had occasioned a blizzard of restrictive "D Notices". These were not challenged and no history of the British press would claim the Suez coverage as its finest hour. But not so the BBC. Suez is inscribed in the BBC's corporate memory as a moment when, to quote the sometime DG Charles Curran: "Against formidable arguments about the national interest, the duty to provide an impartial service was held by the BBC to be paramount, and the pressures were successfully resisted" (Burton: 39).

Briggs provides the wherewithal to challenge this claim, but he does not do so himself. He is content merely to say the public were as well informed as could be expected. In fact, the claim of successful resistance, not heroic examples of the exercise of free expression in the face of censoring authority, lies at the heart of the BBC's oft repeated case for its 'independence' of its paymasters in Westminster. Eden threatened to take it over - just as Churchill had done during the General Strike in 1926; and, if not takeover, then curtailing or cutting the money will do (see: Grant Shapps, *passim*). The BBC claims success because its temporizing has thus far better enabled the sometimes overtly threatening, and always lurking potential, political take-over from occurring. Success in the face of this is self-preservation.

Using Briggs, it is possible to write a querulous (as it were) history of the BBC highlighting its pusillanimity in the face of political hostility. The squaring of the circle between the hard-won right of free expression and the reality of state funding begins, in Briggs' detailed account, at the moment of birth in 1926 with Churchill's threat. As the Broadcasting Company was metamorphosing from commercial chrysalis to statutory corporation butterfly, the General Strike presented it with a choice: and it chose to support the government's position and deny the strikers a hearing. As Briggs points out - only to more or less ignore its implication over the next several thousand pages: "The

Company existed on 8th May [a week into the strike] by sufferance" yet this preserved "a precarious measure of independence throughout the strike" and this, not for the last time, reflects what that measure really came to mean (1995a: 347). The die was cast -- Churchill did not move because he did not have to. The BBC gave the Government no occasion for disquiet. Just as Dunkirk becomes a victory, so pusillanimity becomes defiance.

Over Brigg's many pages persistent incidents of political pressure and interference are reported: e.g. in the 1930s, the closing of the radical talks department under Hilda Matheson, a major pioneer of non-fiction broadcasting forms in the name of charter renewal. In the 1940s, Beveridge was kept off the air because his report was controversial. The anti-nuclear drama documentary, *The War Games* was, in effect, banned by the Home Office, in the 1960s.

A major exception to this - one that proves the rule - we know of, of course, via Briggs. Lord Hill, when chair of the governors at the outset of the Ulster Troubles, defied Reggie Maudling, the Home Secretary, who was seeking to curtail reporting. Hill threatened to disclose the pressure and the Government backed down. He got the right of the BBC to announce that it had been censored - if that were to occur - written into the Charter and Agreement

But this success did not secure Hill's position. Far from it: he was replaced by Prime Minister Heath, at Mrs Thatcher's suggestion, with Sir Michael Swan, because he, Hill, "caused too many problems". This last is Seaton's assessment because, like Briggs, she is not loath to detail counter-evidence of interference and control: e.g. Keith Kyle's censored language reporting Bloody Sunday; the lying about the "unique" process by the secret service which was, by the 1970s, vetting 1400 people a year "much of it conducted on people who did not know they were being checked"; Kenith Trodd: "Yet another creative talent made by the BBC was lost to it, rather than managed"; Michael Grade's opinion that "intellectual snobbery runs through the BBC like a fault line"; the roster of inveterate gropers and sexists - George Howard, the Chair of the Governors, Alan Wicker, Hugh Weldon, Malcome Muggeridge, Billy Cotton Jnr.; the lack of experience of the reporters covering the Falklands; the forced resignation of Alistair Milne. And on and on.

The alternative history is in effect swamped by a grounded position that, overall, the positive value of the BBC is not to be questioned. Much, from the fact of Matheson's defenestration to the immediate cause of Hill's removal, is glossed or omitted. Contradictions, implicit and explicit, proliferate. In consequence, the BBC is held to have been great at "holding things to account", "describing decencies". The license fee itself is, in Seaton's view, no mere hypothecated tax; it is nothing less than "a gift to citizenship".

But cognitive dissonance is also a consequence. "Being popular was fundamental to the BBC", but how that squares with the fault line of intellectual snobbery is not properly explored. Seaton anyway takes till page 232 to begin to consider it. She knows that: "The BBC was traditionally queasy about 'the popular'". "How", though, "was the BBC to build audience taste?" is a question whose legitimacy she does not question. Despite the denting BBC elitism received during Hugh Carleton Greene's tenure as DG in the '60s, John Reith's long shadow lingered: "Few know what they need," he had pronounced in 1924, "and very few what they want". The weekly Programme Review Board was where the programming barons - elitist and populist - fought bloody battles for scheduling advantage. At least that is how it could seem. In Seaton's view, however, it "was a magnificent weekly mechanism for self-reflection". How the funding model makes popularity such an ambiguous good is not examined.

Neither are the shibboleths of managerialism. The accountant Michael Checkland "built a parallel separate universe within the BBC, but although very close to programme makers, it did not make programmes. It was a parallel universe, a more humane orderly place where decent efficiency ruled". In fact, Checkland's BBC could have been paradise were it not for the programmes - costing endless money, causing public rows, encouraging people with open-necked shirts and (as Seaton does note) the wearing of trouser suits. (In fact, her best point in the entire book is when she notes, in a good chapter about the arrival - or rather reappearance - of senior women, the paucity of women's toilets on the BBC's executive floors.) Otherwise, of course, Checkland's daleks were "very close"; who knows what horrors would have ensued had they not been - Jimmy Saville might have been at large!

In the parallel universe, all appointments tended to be of "brilliant" chaps. For example: "The BBC was well led. Charles Curran...". With Swann, he was part of "the most effective double act for a decade", yet "Curran and the governors" immediately "get the calculation of paying staff more and appealing for an increase[d] [license] fee so wrong". The initial brilliance is more than once revealed as not preventing less than stellar managerial performance.

Exculpation is the order of the day - and, to stick with pay, so is blaming others. It is for instance, "the madness of the unions" with endless "exotic rows" that is the source of the BBC's pay problems and inefficiencies - not the fundamental strategic error of arguing for colour (before the commercial competition did so) and a second channel and local radio at exactly the point when penetration was reaching saturation and no further automatic license revenue increases could be expected. Never-mind the 'mad unions,' government pay-policy, the supposed profligacy of commercial TV's pay scales - that the BBC management was lying on a bed not a little of its own making is not examined.

The book is called Pinkoes and Traitors but one begins to wonder how much irony - if any - is thereby intended. A certain political tendency begins to intrude, something one could never accuse Briggs of so obviously deploying. The management's case is endlessly purveyed. Its failings are glossed. Even

Mrs. Thatcher's root and branch hostility to the Corporation is not much allowed to colour Seaton's view of her "splendidly particular self", "her peculiarly focused intelligence". Antipathy to her, Dennis Potter's for example, "demonstrated something of the misogynistic hostility she encountered". Yet the importance of her hostility to the BBC reflects the fundamental difficulty of how an organ of opinion can be state-funded and yet "independent", as a mature democracy demands. Charter renewal approaches with a debate debilitatingly conducted in a vacuum separated from all other media issues. We are getting the usual angels of governance and funding endlessly dancing on the pin's head of renewal. These official and quasi-official histories ought to be playing a role in resolving these perennial debates. Instead their cognitive dissonance merely reflects apparently in-built historiographic fault lines.

References

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